

Five Minutes to **Fire Safety**
No. 2011- August 23, 2011

Topic: Fire Watch – A Human Smoke Detector



A fire watch is implemented to ensure the fire safety of a building during times when the building fire alarm or automatic sprinkler system is out of service. Although it is certainly best practice to implement a fire watch immediately upon discovery of impaired equipment, the life safety code only mandates a formal fire watch be implemented when a system is down for more than 4 hours in a 24 hour period.

Facilities are required to have a fire watch policy to ensure staff are informed of what is required if a system becomes impaired. The major aspects of the fire watch policy includes:

- Immediate notification to all staff & occupants
- Notification to the Authority Having Jurisdiction (KSFM & local fire departments)
- Fire watch rounds shall be continuous
- Person(s) assigned to fire watch shall have no other duties
- Fire watch rounds must be documented

As simple as this may seem in writing, fire watch can be difficult and costly in regards to time, workload, and salaries lost. Additionally, the issues that we find with fire watch are not typically with the policy, rather with the implementation. It is not uncommon to walk into a facility to conduct an annual fire inspection and find that the facility has an impaired fire alarm system. At this point we ask questions regarding what is wrong with the system and is the facility in fire watch.

If the facility is actively in fire watch, expect the Fire Inspector to ask questions to the person responsible for fire watch, concerning their fire watch duties. The last thing they should hear is “Oh, I’m just walking around, checking things out, and wasting time when I could be doing my real job”.

The person(s) responsible for conducting fire watch rounds must be informed and knowledgeable in fire prevention and fire department notification issues. It’s not enough to be walking around the building. They need to keep a diligent watch for fires, obstructions to means of egress, and be able to communicate and explain possible issues with building occupants.

It is absolutely critical for the individual(s) conducting fire watch rounds to understand that if a fire were to occur, the fire alarm system may not sound or the sprinkler system may not activate. Does this person know how to evacuate a building without an alarm system?

At a minimum, fire watch personnel shall walk all corridors, stairwells, hazardous rooms, kitchens, laundry, and all other common areas. They need to be attentive to their surroundings and the activities that are taking place. They are a “human smoke detector”!

Absolutely! Fire watch rounds are continuous, and a facility could potentially stay in fire watch for several days or even several weeks... This is why it is extremely important to make sure you are doing accurate and complete testing, inspection, and maintenance of your fire protection systems!